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DON McGREGOR
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MAR. 1984
NO. 2
NATHANIEL DUSK
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NATHANIEL DUSK
LOVERS DIE AT DUSK PART 2
CREATED and WRITTEN BY DON MCGREGOR
ILLUSTRATED BY GENE COLAN
THE NIGHT WAS WIDE AND DARK BELOW ME, SPRINKLED WITH SNOW THAT LOOKED LIKE THE STARING WHITE EYES OF A THOUSAND CORPSES.
A GREAT FEAR SEIZED ME, LIKE A GIANT FIST CLOSING ABOUT MY HEART.
I SAW DEATH AS CLEARLY AS I COULD SEE THE DISTANT CITY LIGHTS!
J-8759

LETTERING: JOHN COSTANZA COLORING: TOM ZIUKO EDITED BY ALAN GOLD

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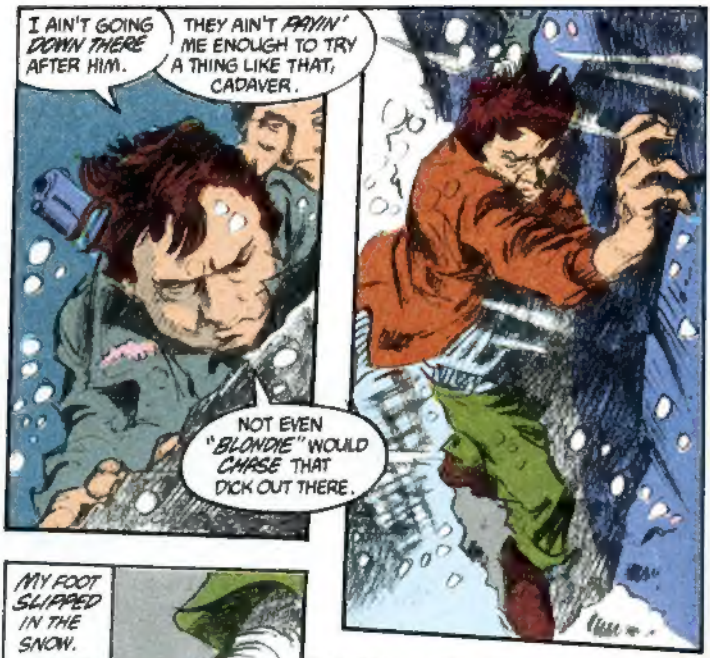
INSTINCTIVELY, I TWISTED MY BODY HARD, LEANING IT AWAY FROM THE DEEP IMMENSITY THAT CALLED SO HYPNOTICALLY TO IT.
MY FINGERS GRIPPED THE COLD, WET EDGE AND TRIED TO DIG TRENCHES IN THE CEMENT.
I WAS TOO AWARE OF THE EMPTY SPACE BENEATH MY FEET, OF THE CITY SIDEWALKS FAR BELOW, WAITING TO RECEIVE ME.
HEY, DUSK... LET ME HELP YOU OUT.
OR WOULD I CLEAR THE SIDEWALK, IF I FELL, MY BODY SLAMMING INTO 34TH STREET?
NEITHER PROSPECT WAS PROMISING. I FORCED MYSELF TO MAKE ONE HAND LET GO OF THE CEMENT.
IT WAS ONE OF THE HARDEST DAMN THINGS I'VE EVER DONE.
I THRUST UPWARD--
KRUMP
--DESPERATELY HOPING THAT MY FINGERS WOULD SEIZE THE GUNSEL'S LEG.
HE SLIPPED IN THE SLUSH. HIS FACE HIT THE CEMENT, WITH A SOUND LIKE RAW MEAT BEING TENDERIZED IN A SLAUGHTERHOUSE.
I HUNG ONTO THE SONOFABITCH FOR EVERYTHING I WAS WORTH. HIRED GUNS DIDN'T MIND KILLING OTHER FOLKS, BUT THEY WERE NO CRAZIER ABOUT DYING THEMSELVES THAN ANYONE ELSE WAS.

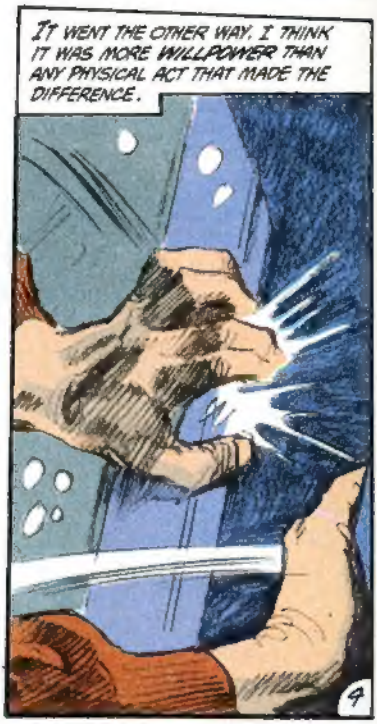
HIS THICK FINGERS TRIED TO FIND THE SOFT INDENTATION OF MY EYES. WHAT COULD YOU EXPECT? THAT SOME DUMMY WHO THINKS IT'S A BIG GAG TO TRY TO THROW YOU OFF THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING WOULD FIGHT FAIR? FAT CHANCE!
I USED HIM LIKE A HUMAN ROPE LADDER, DRAGGING MYSELF UP HIS BODY. I REFUSED TO LET GO. I WANTED TO YELL AT HIM, "IF I GO, YOU GO!" BUT I WAS BREATHING TOO HARD TO SPEAK.
THE SECOND GUNSEL WAS SILENT AS THE FALLING SNOW. HE WAS THE REAL PRO OF THE DUO.
HE KEPT TRYING TO GET A CLEAR SHOT AT ME.
I DID MY BEST TO KEEP THE OVERWEIGHT LOUDMOUTH BETWEEN HIM AND ME. I HOPED HE LIKED THIS SLOB A LOT BETTER THAN I DID--
THUD
--AND DIDN'T DECIDE TO PUT A BULLET THROUGH HIM SO HE COULD GET ONE INTO ME.
3

I TRIED FOR A LOWER LEDGE. THE FEBRUARY WIND WAS A HARSH MISTRESS, TUGGING AT ME DEMANDINGLY.
I KEPT TRYING TO CONVINCE MYSELF THAT I WAS USED TO BEING HIGH IN THE AIR, THAT I WAS A PILOT, BUT THE THING I WAS MOST AWARE OF WAS THAT I DIDN'T HAVE A PARACHUTE.


I AIN'T GOING DOWN THERE AFTER HIM.
THEY AIN'T PAYIN' ME ENOUGH TO TRY A THING LIKE THAT, CADAVER.
NOT EVEN "BLONDIE" WOULD CHASE THAT DICK OUT THERE.

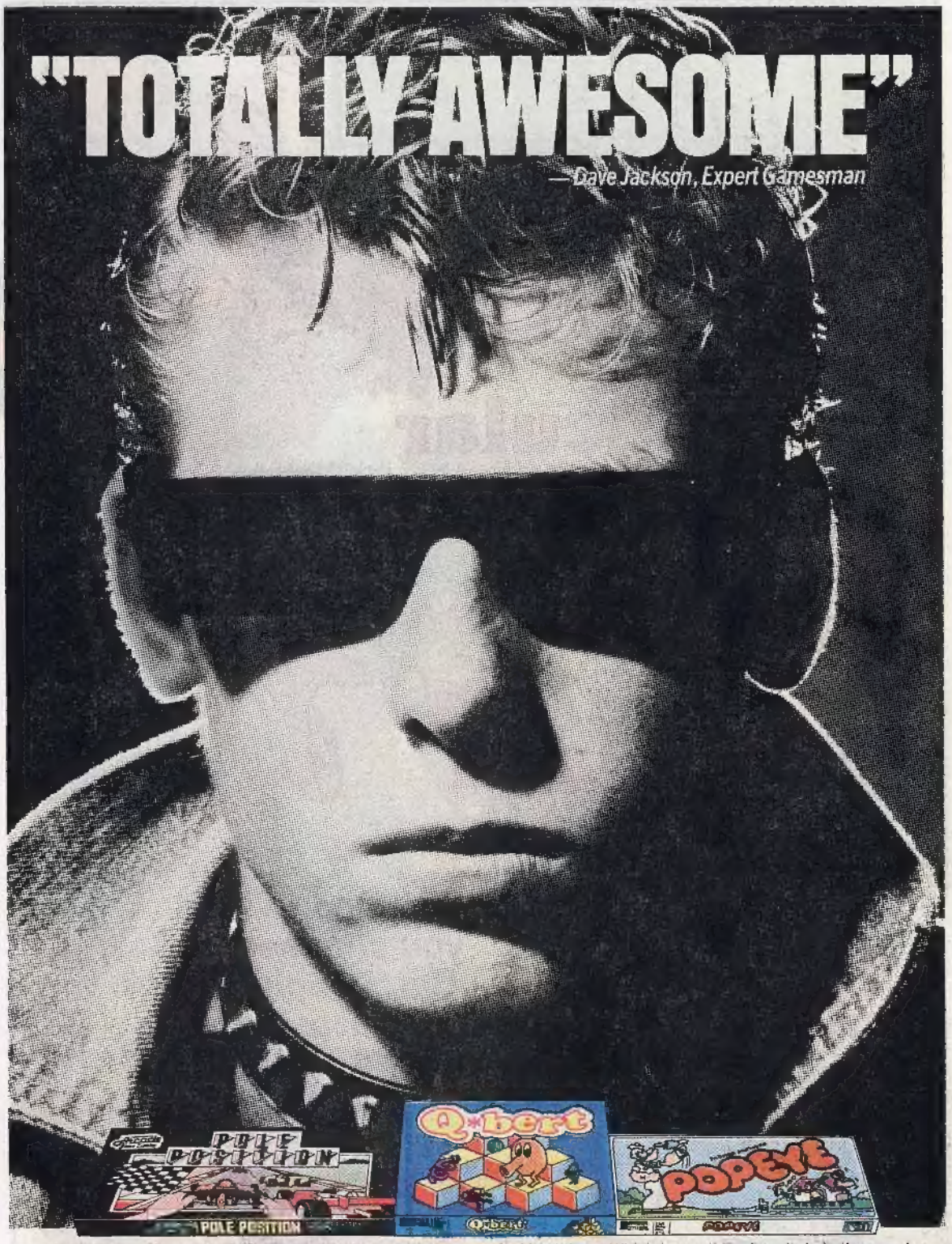
MY FOOT SLIPPED IN THE SNOW.
WHEN I WAS 10 YEARS OLD, I UNDERSTOOD THE MYSTERY OF SNOW, AND NEVER SLIPPED, BUT YOU GET OLDER AND YOU FORGET THE KNACK.

THERE WAS A LONG MOMENT WHERE IT COULD GO EITHER WAY, LIFE OR DEATH, STAYING ON THE LEDGE OR ENDING UP A DARK RED STAIN ON THE FRESH SNOW.


IT WENT THE OTHER WAY. I THINK IT WAS MORE WILLPOWER THAN ANY PHYSICAL ACT THAT MADE THE DIFFERENCE.

"TOTALLY AWESOME"

—Dave Jackson, Expert Gamesman



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GODDAMN!
I THOUGHT SURE HE WAS GOING TO FALL RIGHT ON HIS BEAN!
THE WIND SWEPT SNOW INTO MY EYES. I COULD HARDLY SEE.
I LOOKED INTO THE OFFICE WINDOW. THE PLACE WAS DARK, HIDING THE SECRETS OF WHAT IT WAS USED FOR DURING THE DAY.
BUT I COULD HEAR MY BREATHING, A DEEP, RAGGED SOUND THAT SEEMED VERY LOUD, THE WAY BREATHING SOUNDS IN A HOSPITAL SICKROOM WHEN SOMEONE IS DYING.
I LURCHED THROUGH THE GLASS, ALMOST AS AFRAID OF DOING THAT AS I HAD BEEN OF THE VAST HEIGHT.
GRRAAASHH
THE BROKEN SHARDS SCRAPED AND SCRATCHED, BUT NONE OF THE JAGGED EDGES REALLY SCORED.
I REACHED FOR THE PHONE. I KEPT THINKING OF JOYCE. THE LOUDMOUTH HADN'T MENTIONED JOYCE BY NAME, BUT HE DAMN SURE HAD BEEN TALKING ABOUT HER.
I HOPED I STILL HAD A VOICE WHEN JOYCE'S LANDLADY, MRS. IANOTTI, CAME ON THE LINE.
KLUNK
KLUNK
BEYOND THE DOOR, THERE WERE FOOTBEATS ON THE LINOLEUM, A HAUNTING NIGHTTIME LITANY.
MRS. IANOTTI, PICK UP THE PHONE!
PLEASE... ANSWER THE DAMN PHONE!
5

THIS IS THE ROOM HE BROKE INTO, I'M TELLING YA, CADAVER!
IMPORTS INC
LOOK...
I'M WRONG, I'LL BUY YA A BEER.
CRASH
COME ON OUT FROM BEHIND THERE, DUSK. WE'RE SUPPOSED TO MAKE THIS LOOK LIKE AN ACCIDENT... YOU KNOW, A LOVER'S LEAP, ALL THAT LOVEY-DOVEY CRAP--
BUZZ BUZZ
--BUT IF WE GOTTA DRILL YA... WE GOTTA DRILL YAAAAA!
THE PHONE KEPT RINGING MONOTONOUSLY, INSISTENTLY POLITE, AS IT FLEW OFF THE DESK AND WHACKED INTO THE SILENT KILLER'S FACE.
BUZZ BUZZ
WHY THE HELL DIDN'T SOMEONE ANSWER? WHERE COULD MRS. IANOTTI BE AT ONE IN THE MORNING?
THE TWO LOOKED MORE LIKE LAUREL AND HARDY THAN SEASONED KILLERS, BUT THE GUNS IN THEIR HANDS STILL WEREN'T A JOKE.
ALL THE WAY OUT TO THE HALLWAY, I COULD HEAR THE PHONE RINGING. UNANSWERED.

DON'T SHOOT! DON'T SHOOT!
YOU KEEP THOSE HANDS OUT AND HIGH, MISTER. YOU GOT ME REAL NERVOUS.
LISTEN CLOSE... THERE'S TWO MEN RIGHT BEHIND ME! THEY'RE THE ONES YOU'VE GOT TO...
I THREW MYSELF DOWN ONTO THE POLISHED LINOLEUM, LIKE A K.O.'D FIGHTER HITTING THE MAT FOR THE LAST TIME.
BAM
BAM
THE LOUD, EXPLOSIVE CRACK OF THE GUNSHOT DROWNED OUT THE SLIGHT NOISE--
--OF BULLET PENETRATING FLESH.
I DIDN'T KNOW IF THE SECURITY GUARD WAS ALIVE OR DEAD --
--BUT THERE WAS NO TIME TO CHECK.
SPINNG
7

THERE WERE THOUSANDS OF STEPS DOWN TO THE BOTTOM OF THE EMPIRE STATE.

IT WAS A LONG, EXHAUSTING DESCENT.

I KEPT REMEMBERING THE UNANSWERED TELEPHONE.

I TOLD MYSELF THAT MRS. IANOTTI WAS A *DEEP SLEEPER*. I TOLD MYSELF THERE WAS NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT.

ON 5TH AVENUE, THERE WAS A LONE SET OF HEADLIGHTS, SOFT HALOS MOVING THROUGH THE NIGHT SNOW. THE CAB LOOKED LIKE SOME *MECHANICAL GHOST* THAT HAD LOST ITS WAY

I LOOKED AS WILD AS A WALL ST. BROKER, LEARNING HE'D GONE *BUST* AND ABOUT TO JUMP OFF A LEDGE.

I WAS SURPRISED THE DRIVER STOPPED.

I GAVE HIM JOYCE'S ADDRESS. MY VOICE SOUNDED HOARSE AND SCARED. I HARDLY *RECOGNIZED* IT.

MY *STOMACH* FELT AS IF IT WANTED TO COME UP THROUGH MY LUNGS AND CARRY THEM WITH IT AS IT CAME OUT OF MY MOUTH.

THE CABBIE WANTED TO TALK. HE DIDN'T *REQUIRE* ANY ANSWERS.

YOU'RE *LUCKY* I STOPPED, MISTER

LOTS'VE DRIVERS ARE TALKIN' ABOUT PUTTIN' THE *SCREWS* TO OLD MAYOR FIORELLO.

HEY! HE RAISES CAB FARE 5¢, AND WHO'S IT GO TO? I'LL TELL YOU WHO IT *DON'T* GO TO! IT DON'T GO TO THE DRIVERS! *WORKING STIFFS* LIKE ME WHO GOT KIDS TO FEED!

I'VE GOT A FEW *OTHER* THINGS ON MY MIND BESIDES TAXIS.

OH, YEAH. SURE. YOU SAY THAT *NOW*.

WAIT TILL YOU CAN'T FIND A CAB NEXT TIME YOU *WANT* ONE. THEN, YOU'LL CHANGE YOUR TUNE.

WHAT THE HECK THEY GOT GOIN' ON UP HERE? A *CIRCUS*?

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THE CAB SKIPPED TO A STOP. I JUMPED OUT INTO THE COLD WIND.

I WAS SUDDENLY AFRAID TO BREATHE, AS IF LIFE WERE GOING OUT OF CONTROL AND THERE WAS NO WAY FOR ME TO BRING IT BACK TO NORMALCY.

I HAD NEVER FELT A FEAR LIKE THIS BEFORE, NOT EVEN DURING A DOGFIGHT, WHEN GUNFIRE FILLED THE AIR AND YOUR BIPLANE FELT AS IF IT WERE MADE FROM BALSA WOOD.

I LOOKED AT LT. MURRAY ABRAHAMS. HE REACHED FOR MY ARM. I KNEW IT WAS A COMPASSIONATE GESTURE, MADE OUT OF OUR PAST FRIENDSHIP.

YOU DON'T WANT TO GO IN THERE, NATE.

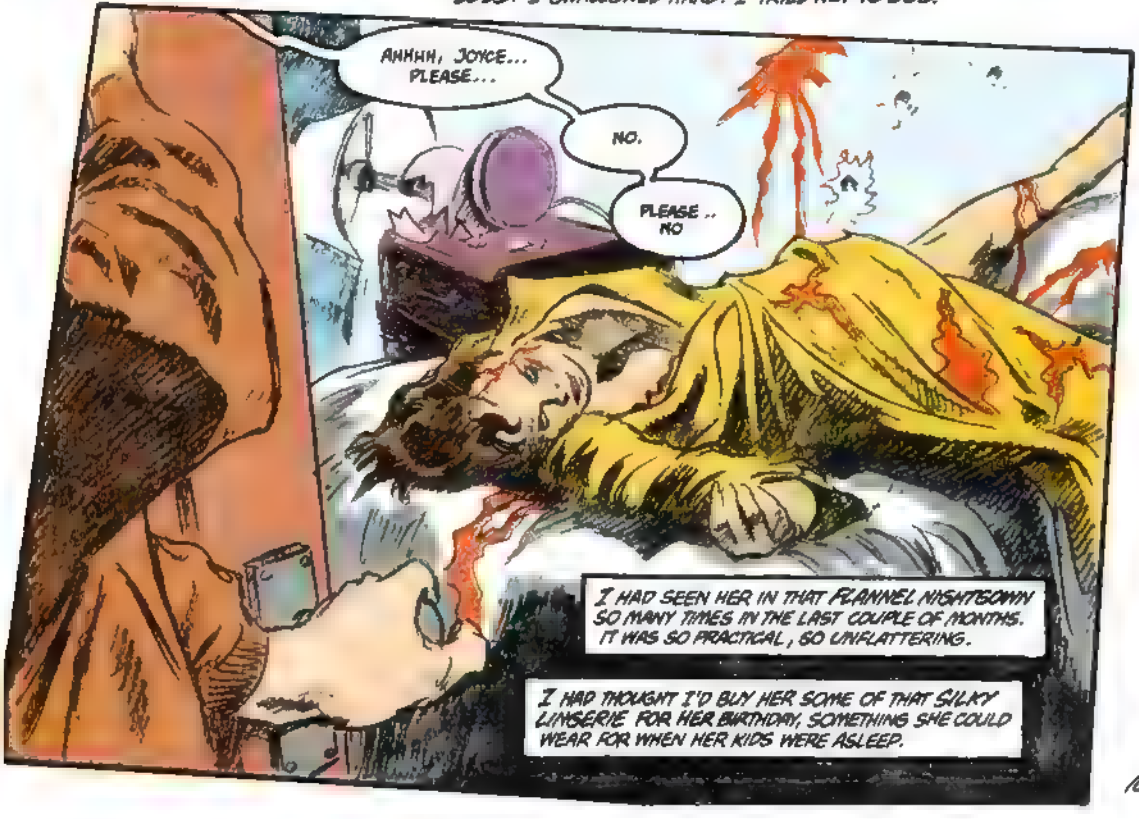
YOU'RE RIGHT...

I DON'T WANT TO...

...BUT I HAVE TO.

HER PLACE WAS FILLED WITH PROFESSIONAL MEN, DETECTIVES, PATROLMEN, THE MEDICAL EXAMINER. THEIR PRESENCE MADE THE FAMILIAR ROOM FRIGHTENING.

JOYCE'S BLOOD WAS BRIGHT OVER THE PALE, FLOWERY PATTERN. THE RED SHRIEKED OF LIFE AND LOSS. I SWALLOWED HARD. I TRIED NOT TO SOB.


AHHHH, JOYCE... PLEASE...
NO.
PLEASE .. NO
I HAD SEEN HER IN THAT FLANNEL NIGHTGOWN SO MANY TIMES IN THE LAST COUPLE OF MONTHS. IT WAS SO PRACTICAL, SO UNFLATTERING.
I HAD THOUGHT I'D BUY HER SOME OF THAT SILKY LINGERIE FOR HER BIRTHDAY, SOMETHING SHE COULD WEAR FOR WHEN HER KIDS WERE ASLEEP.

I TURNED BACK TOWARD THE LIVING ROOM--
--AND INTO JENNIE'S EYES.
THEY WERE THE SAME BROWNY-AND-JADE COLOR AS HER MOTHER'S.
THEY STABBED ME LIKE A KNIFE-BLADE--
--ASKING WORDLESS QUESTIONS THAT HAD NO ANSWERS.

THURSDAY FEBRUARY 1, 1934

ABRAHAMS WATCHED PATIENTLY AS I WENT THROUGH THE WANTED CIRCULARS. WE HAD BOTH DRUNK TOO MANY CUPS OF OVERCOOKED COFFEE. MY MOUTH TASTED OF YESTERDAY'S CIGARETTES.

IT WAS LONG PAST DAWN BEFORE I FOUND ONE OF THEM.
ANDREW EVANS
HIS FACE WAS AS GREY IN THE PHOTO AS IT WAS IN LIFE.
WANTED
HERE!
THIS IS ONE OF THEM!
EDDIE "THE CADAVER" PICHANO
EDDIE "THE CADAVER" PICHANO. OUT OF CHICAGO. HE'S A FREELANCE GUNSEL.
SOMEONE MUST HAVE IMPORTED HIM INTO NEW YORK FOR THIS JOB. BUT WHY, NATE?
WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

WHO WANTS YOU DEAD SO *BAD* THEY'LL KILL A WOMAN JUST BECAUSE YOU'VE BEEN *SEEING* HER.

YOU ASKING AS A *FRIEND*...

...OR A *COP*?

BOTH.

I DON'T HAVE IT ALL *FIGURED*. I SPENT ALL NIGHT... SEEING JOYCE DEAD.

I KEEP SEEING THE LITTLE KID'S EYES, LIKE THEY'RE *ASKING* ME SOMETHING I CAN'T ANSWER.

AND I KEEP GETTING THE *CRAZIEST NOTION* IT WAS THE OTHER WAY ROUND.

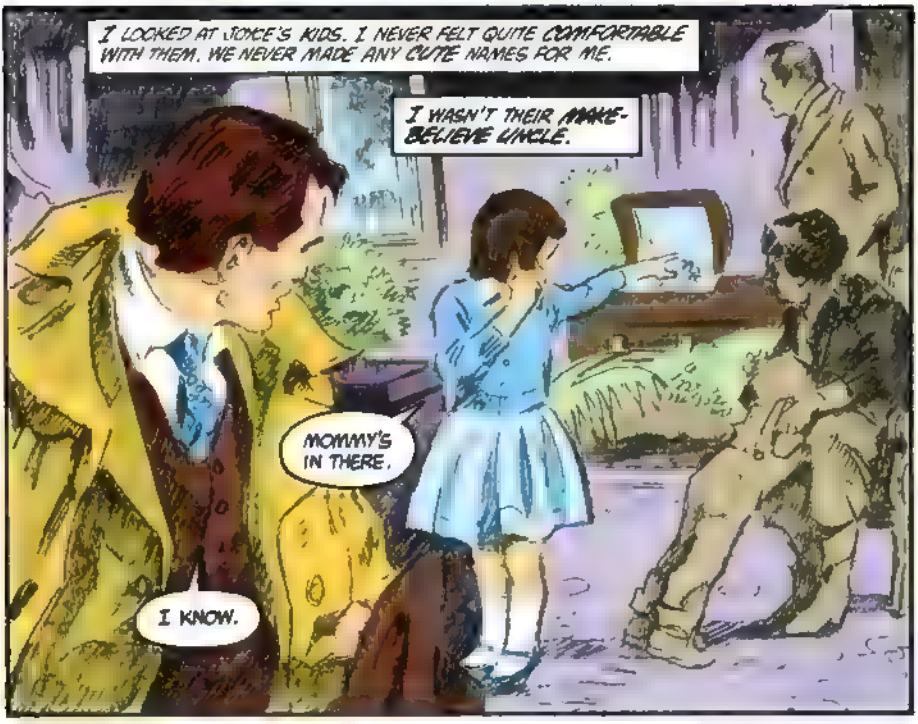
I DON'T FOLLOW.

I THINK THEY TRIED TO KILL *ME* BECAUSE I WAS SEEING...

...HER.

FRIDAY FEBRUARY 2, 1934

I HATE FUNERAL PARLORS. IT'S NOT THAT THEY HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH LIFE, IT'S THAT THEY HAVE VERY LITTLE TO DO WITH THE REALITY OF DEATH.


I LOOKED AT JOYCE'S KIDS. I NEVER FELT QUITE COMFORTABLE WITH THEM. WE NEVER MADE ANY CUTE NAMES FOR ME.
I WASN'T THEIR MAKE-BELIEVE UNCLE.
MOMMY'S IN THERE.
I KNOW.

I DIDN'T LOOK AT JOYCE: THE COSMETICALLY-ALTERED FACE HAD LITTLE RELATION TO THE JOYCE I KNEW.

I LOOKED, INSTEAD, AT JENNIFER. I SAW HER FOR THE FIRST TIME.
I SAW THE PERSON AND NOT JUST THE KID, NOT JUST THE BRIGHT CURLS OR THE WHINING VOICE--

THERE WEREN'T MANY MOURNERS WATCHING AS THEY LOWERED HER INTO THE WINTER-HARD EARTH. ABRAHAMS. MRS. IANOTTI JENNIFER AND ANTHONY. ARTHUR SQUIRE. MYSELF.
MINISTER SAYS MOMMY'S DEAD. HE SAYS SHE WON'T BE BACK. DO YOU KNOW WHAT DEAD MEANS, MR DUSK?
NOT TOO MUCH BETTER'N YOU, JENNIE.
GUESS MOSTLY IT MEANS WHAT THE MINISTER TOLD YOU... SHE.. WON'T BE HERE ANYMORE.
I CLEARED MY THROAT I DID NOT NEED TO.
SHE...UHH... YOUR MOM... SHE LOVED YOU KIDS.
DID YOU LOVE HER?
I STOPPED BREATHING. THE WORLD WENT STILL. I DID NOT KNOW WHAT TO SAY.
WELL, JENNIE...
I STILL DID NOT KNOW WHAT TO SAY.
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IT'S OKAY, MR DUSK I LOVED MOMMY I TOLD HER EVERY DAY

ARTHUR SQUIRE STOOD APART FROM THE OTHERS, ALMOST AS IF DENYING HIS PRESENCE AT THE PROCEEDINGS. WHEN HE TURNED AT MY APPROACH, I COULD SEE FEAR IN HIS EYES, LIKE SOME LIVE THING THAT THREATENED TO DEVOUR HIM
I'M SURPRISED TO SEE YOU HERE, MR. SQUIRE.

I THOUGHT YOU HADN'T SEEN JOYCE IN FOUR OR FIVE YEARS TILL THE OTHER DAY?
I HADN'T...BUT THEN..I MEAN, THE DAY AFTER I RAN INTO HER I SAW HER NAME IN THE OBITUARY COLUMNS
I...I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. I WANTED TO...YOU KNOW HOW IT IS. PAY MY RESPECTS.

WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF, MR SQUIRE?
NOTHING NOTHING
I SHOULDN'T'VE COME, YOU KNOW... BUT A WOMAN LIKE THAT, SO YOUNG, IT GETS YOU TO THINKING.

I DON'T WANT ANY TROUBLE. I GOT TROUBLE ENOUGH TRYING TO GET THREE PULPS OUT A MONTH AND MAKING SURE THEY'RE NOT SO CLOSE TO THE SHADOW OR DOC SAVAGE WE GET SUED--
--BUT NOT SO FAR AWAY THAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT MAKE THE MISTAKE AND PICK US UP.
WAIT UP, SQUIRE. I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT JOYCE'S PAST

I NEED TO KNOW WHY SOMEONE WOULD WANT HER DEAD. I NEED TO ASK SOMEONE WHO KNEW HER BEFORE I MET HER--
--BEFORE SHE CUT OFF HER PAST. AND THE ONLY ONE WHO FITS THE BILL IS YOU, MR. SQUIRE.
LOOK, I'M JUST GOING TO GO BACK INTO THE WOODWORK. I DON'T NEED ANY GRIEF OVER A WOMAN I HARDLY EVEN KNEW.
YOU'VE ALREADY GOT TROUBLE, IF YOU TRY TO HOLD BACK FROM ME!
HIS FEAR MADE HIM ACT OUT OF CHARACTER; HE TOOK A WIDE, INEFFECTUAL SWING AT ME.
I SWUNG BACK, HARDER THAN I HAD TO. A SURGING RELEASE OF ANGER MADE THE BLOOD POUND IN MY TEMPLES.
THUD
YOU'RE NOT A FIGHTER, SQUIRE. YOU'RE TOO USED TO PLUSH OFFICES AND PLAYING BOSS. BUT DON'T PLAY GAMES WITH ME!
LEAVE HIM ALONE, NATE. SWEAR TO GOD, I'LL BREAK YOUR GODDAMNED ARM, IF YOU DON'T!
THE ANGER SAID, "HIT HIM AGAIN! HIT HIM AGAIN!" EVEN THOUGH THERE WAS NO NEED. PERHAPS IT WAS THE GIVING IN TO THE PRIMITIVE INSTINCT OF EARLY MAN AND WOMAN, THE CRUEL URGE TO VICTIMIZE THOSE WE SENSE ARE WEAKER THAN OURSELVES.

WE STOOD UNDER THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE, STARING INTO THE EAST RIVER. I LOOKED FOR A TUGBOAT. I THOUGHT THE THROATY HORN OF A TUG GIVING ITS MESSAGE TO THE WORLD WOULD BE APPROPRIATE. THERE WASN'T A TUGBOAT IN SIGHT OR HORN TO BE HEARD. LIFE IS LIKE THAT SOMETIMES.
I'M GOING TO HAVE TO KEEP YOU ON A TIGHT LEASH, NATE. I CAN'T HAVE YOU RUNNING AROUND THE CITY BEATING UP THE CITIZENRY.
LOOK, I FEEL VERY BAD ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR GIRL. I KNOW HOW THIS MUST HURT I EVEN BELIEVE, MAYBE, THAT YOU REALLY DON'T KNOW WHAT IS GOING ON.
YOU USED TO TAKE IT VERY HARD IF SOMEONE LEANED ON A SUSPECT. YOU WERE VERY MOLIER-THAN-THOU ABOUT IT, IF YOU WANT TO KNOW THE TRUTH.
AND NOW, HERE YOU ARE, TAKING ON A MAN WITH A SOFT GUT. DON'T LET YOUR HURT TURN YOU INTO A HYPOCRITE. YOU'RE MANY UNPLEASANT THINGS ... BUT YOU'VE NEVER BEEN THAT.
YOU KNOW, ABRAHAMS... I'D BEEN IN BED WITH THAT WOMAN FOR THE PAST THREE MONTHS.
WE DID EVERYTHING A MAN AND WOMAN CAN DO... THINGS I HAD NO IDEA A WOMAN WOULD DO...
... WOULD DO AND ENJOY THEM.
17

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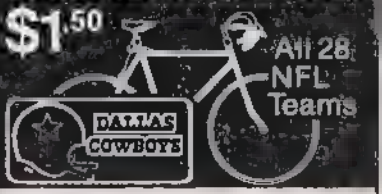

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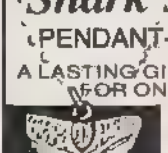

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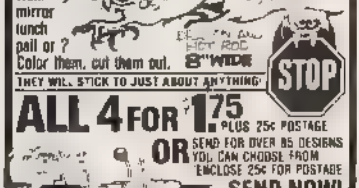

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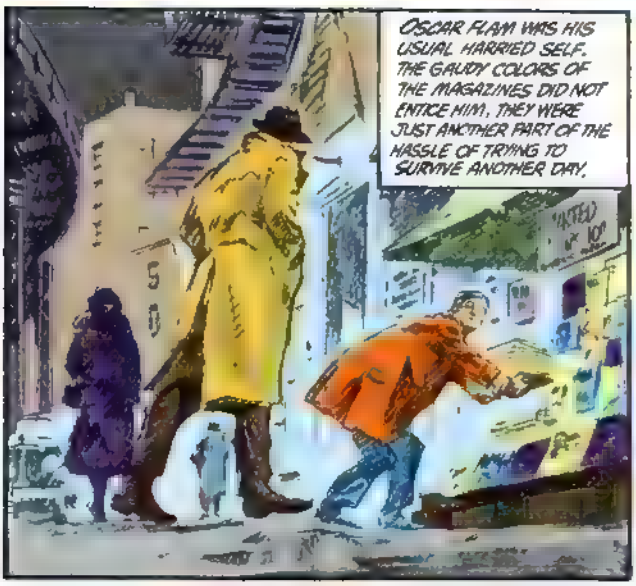
SO. I THOUGHT I KNEW HER AS WELL AS A MAN CAN KNOW A WOMAN...
--BECAUSE I KNEW HER IN BED.. AND NOW I FIND OUT, I DIDN'T REALLY KNOW MUCH ABOUT HER AT ALL.
ISN'T THAT THE DAMNEDEST THING?
THE SUN WAS GOING OUT IN A BLAZE OF GLORY; IT REFLECTED, BLINDINGLY, ORANGE OFF THE DIRTY WINDOWS.
IT SEEMED AS IF THE WHOLE DAMN CITY WAS DYING.
NATHANIEL DUSK
PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR
FOR AWHILE, I DRANK FOR JOYCE, FOR HER LAUGHTER GONE TO SOON.
THEN I DRANK FOR THE LITTLE GIRL IN THE CEMETERY WHO DID NOT UNDERSTAND DEATH.
THEN, I DRANK FOR MYSELF.
RRING
18

YEAH? WHO IS IT?
DUSK? THIS IS ARTHUR SQUIRE SOMEBODY SAW ME AT JOYCE'S FUNERAL TODAY SOMEBODY NOT SO NICE
I NEED TO TALK TO YOU QUICK. I'M AT 311 DIVISION STREET. APT 3L


OSCAR FLAM WAS HIS USUAL HARRIED SELF. THE GAUDY COLORS OF THE MAGAZINES DID NOT ENTICE HIM, THEY WERE JUST ANOTHER PART OF THE HASSLE OF TRYING TO SURVIVE ANOTHER DAY.

HIS EYES HELD A SPECIAL KIND OF PAIN THAT WOULD ALWAYS BE THERE, THE KIND OF PAIN THAT COMES WHEN YOU HAVE A HEALTHY CHILD COME DOWN WITH A TERRIBLE DISEASE LIKE POLIO.
HOW'S LITTLE ALBERT DOING?
HE DOESN'T SEEM TO CHANGE
MASTER DETECTIVE

WORKING LATE, TONIGHT, HUH?
IT KEEPS THE WIFE OFF MY NECK... BESIDES, THE DOCTOR'S BILLS FOR ALBERT, THEY'RE ENOUGH TO BREAK A MAN'S BACK, YOU IN A HURRY?
YEAH A BIT BUT A THOUGHT JUST STRUCK ME. YOU SELL THESE PULPS, YOU EVER HEAR OF A PUBLISHER NAMED ARTHUR SQUIRE?
NATHAN, I SELL 'EM... I DON'T READ 'EM
THANKS.
YOU ON YOUR WAY TO SEE THIS GUY WHO PRINTS THESE RAGS?
YEAH ..IF HE GIVES ME SOME FREE COPIES, I'LL PASS THEM ON TO YOU

THERE WAS NO ANSWER WHEN I PRESSED THE RINKY-DINK BUZZER.
BZZ
BZZZ
SMASH
I WASN'T USED TO BREAKING-AND-ENTERING, BUT I HAD HEARD THE URGENCY IN SQUIRE'S VOICE, SEEN THE FEAR IN HIS EYES.
I HEARD THE DRIPPING SOUND AS SOON AS I STEPPED INTO THE SHADOWY FOYER.
DRIP
DRIP
I'D HEARD THE SOFT, WET SOUND BEFORE, IN THE BACK ROOM OF THE PRECINCT HOUSE.
IT WAS THE SOUND OF BLOOD HITTING THE FLOOR A DROP AT A TIME.
DRIP
SQUIRE WAS IN THE KITCHEN. HIS BACK WAS ARCHED UNNATURALLY. THE GASH ACROSS HIS THROAT WAS JAGGED AND FINAL.

I HEARD A NEW SOUND
SNAP
IT WAS AS DISTURBING AS THE FIRST
LOOK WHO WE GOT HERE, CADAVER! OUR OLD BUDDY WITH THE NINE LIVES.
THIS TIME WE DON'T GET FANCY, DUSK' WE CROAK YOU THE EASY WAY
BAM
THE KITCHEN QUARTERS WERE NO PLACE FOR A GUN BATTLE. THE TABLE AND CHAIRS WOULD NOT PROVIDE ADEQUATE COVER.
BULLETS WOULD GO RIGHT THROUGH THEM AND INTO ME
I FIRED BACK ONCE. THE FLAME FROM THE BARREL LIT UP THE KITCHEN WITH A BRIEF, BLEACHED LOOK, ALL THE COLORS MUTED, ROBBED OF LIFE.
KABOOM
BLAM
THE GUNSHOT GAVE ME THE CHANCE TO TRY TO ESCAPE
THE METAL RUNGS VIBRATED UNDER MY FEET, WITH A STRANGE, ALMOST FURIOUS MUSICAL BEAT THAT SEEMED TO SCREAM, "KEEP MOVING, DUSK! MOVE FAST BEFORE A BULLET SHATTERS YOUR SPINE!"
21

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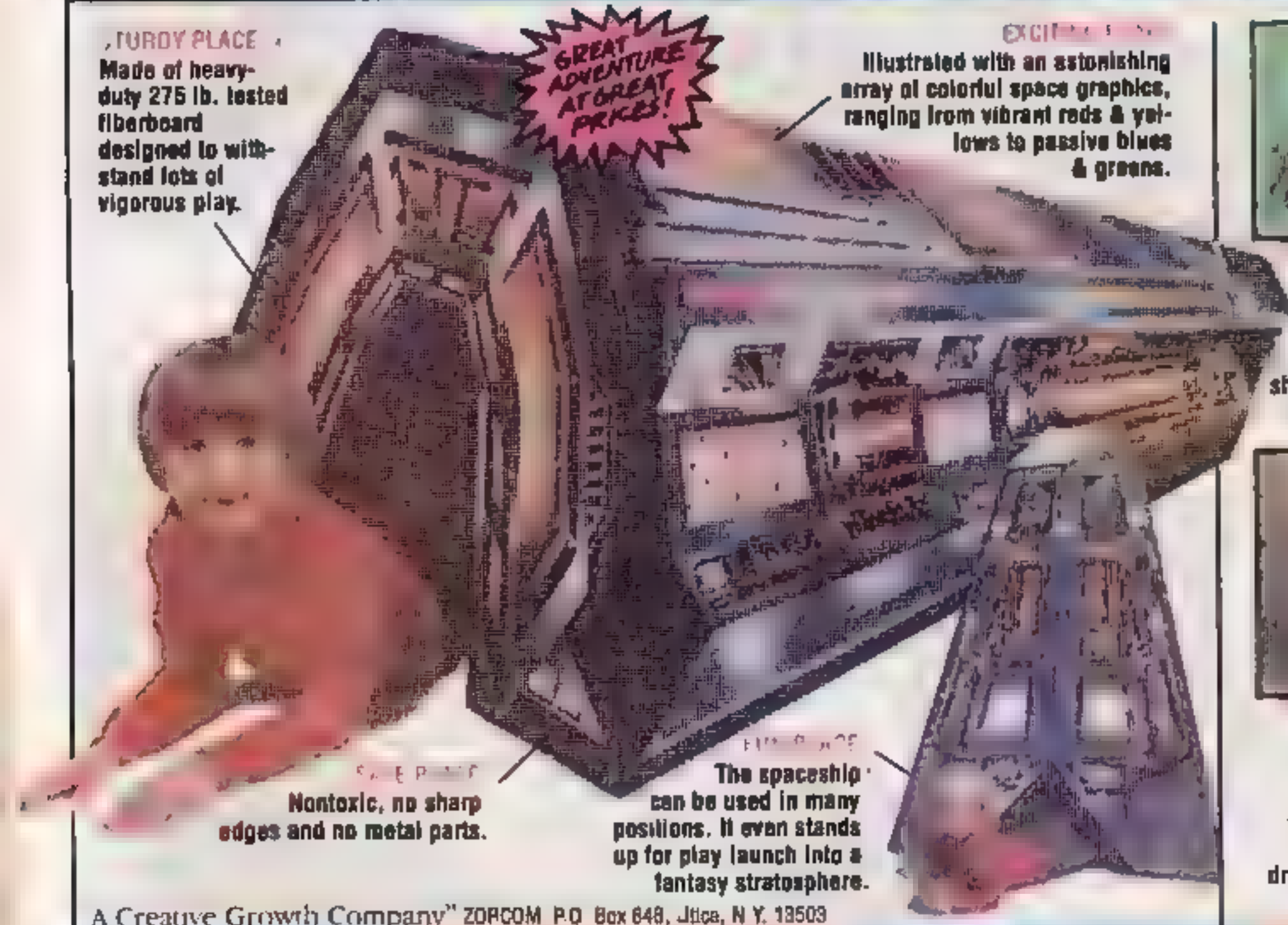

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I COULD HEAR THEIR FEET ON THE FIRE ESCAPE.
THE MUSIC THEY MADE SEEMED DIFFERENT, LESS FURIOUS, MORE CONFIDENT
WE RAN UNDER THE EXPANSE OF THE SECOND AVENUE EL. IT WAS ANOTHER WORLD HERE, ONE OF WONDER AND MENACE, WHERE LIGHT AND SHADOW WERE IN ETERNAL CONFLICT
THE CHASE WAS EERILY QUIET. NO ONE SHOUTED. THERE WAS NOTHING TO SAY, AND NO ONE WASTED HIS BREATH SAYING IT.
THEY DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO STOP AND AIM; I DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO TURN AND FIRE.
THE EL STAIRWAY OFFERED COLD SANCTUARY, BUT NO PROMISES.
I VAULTED OVER THE TURN-STILE, AFRAID MY TRENCHCOAT WOULD CATCH ON THE WOODEN SLATS AND THROW ME FACE FIRST ONTO THE DIRTY CEMENT.
ON THE EL PLATFORM, I SAW A TRAIN IN THE DISTANCE, TAKING ITS OWN SWEET TIME, SWAYING TO AND FRO, IN ITS USUAL LAZY ROUTINE.
I COULD BE DEAD BY THE TIME IT ROLLED INTO THE STATION.
22

HEY! YOU MEN CAN'T COME CHARGING THROUGH HERE! YOU'VE GOT TO PAY.
STOW IT, POPS! YOU DON'T WANNA DIE OVER A NICKEL FARE!
PUSH!
THE TRAIN WAS CLOSER, TAUNTING ME WITH ITS SLOW ARRIVAL
THEY CAME ONTO THE ICY PLATFORM. IT SEEMED QUITE POSSIBLE WE WERE THE ONLY THREE PEOPLE AWAKE IN THE NIGHT
I CLOSED ONE EYE, TRYING NOT TO BREATHE HARD. MY HAND WAS SHAKING.
I SQUEEZED THE TRIGGER, SLOW AND EASY, THE WAY THEY TELL YOU IN THE HOW-TO BOOKS.
NOTHING HAPPENED!
THE GODDAMNED GUN WAS JAMMED!

THE GUNSEL GRINNED. HIS GUN WORKED JUST FINE
BAM
THE TRAIN FINALLY OPENED ITS RUSTY DOORS.
THANK GOD FOR SMALL MIRACLES.
PING
YOU TAKE THAT CAR, CADAVER! WE'LL GO AFTER HIM FROM BOTH ENDS
THE TRAIN LURCHED, BEGAN ITS SWAYING MOTION AGAIN.
I THRUST OPEN THE DOOR LEADING BETWEEN CARS. IT SCRAPED PROTESTINGLY.
I HAD AN IDEA TO HIDE IN WAIT ON THE ROOFTOP
IT HAD BEEN A GOOD IDEA IT WOULD HAVE BEEN A GREAT IDEA IF IT HAD WORKED.
BUT LOUDMOUTH CAME OUT ONTO THE COUPLING TOO FAST FOR ME TO GET READY FOR HIM!
YOU'LL NEVER MAKE IT TO THE TOP, SHAMUS! I GOT YOUR ASS, DEAD TO RIGHTS!
AND I'M GOING TO BLOW IT AWAY!
TO BE CONTINUED!

A SOLITARY PRIVATE EYE IN A MEDIUM OF SUPER-HEROES

by Don McGregor

L-1520

THE BOOK YOU ARE HOLDING has at least one unique factor in the world of comics—and hopefully a few others, but that's for you readers to decide. Nathaniel Dusk may be the first private detective character to be released in his own title by either of the two major comics companies, DC and Marvel.

Over the years, there have been a few detective characters, but they have mainly been relegated to back-up strips in books that cover-featured costumed heroes. I don't make claims to be an expert on the subject or to have knowledge of all the comics printed over the years, but I have had more than a passing exposure to the medium since the early 50s. One of the few back-up detective strips that I recall from the 1950s was "Roy Raymond, TV Detective," a regular eight-page feature in the pages of *Detective Comics*. DC did release a *Charlie Chan* comic sometime around the late 50s. And Marvel published a black-and-white magazine chronicling some of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes during the 1970s. The adaptations were written by my friend Doug Moench, who just happens to pen many of the *Batman* stories for DC.

Dell Comics offered some private eye titles in a series of television spin-offs of Warner Brothers' popular *77 Sunset Strip*. These books, published in the late 50s,were drawn by Alex Toth and, at the end of the run, by Russ Manning. There was also at least one *Peter Gunn* comic that I recall, and three issues of *Mike Shayne*, which were adaptations not of the T.V. show but of Brett Halliday's novels. A curious threesome, those books.

But a private eye created *especially* for the comics medium is as rare as the breed of man he often symbolizes—the idealistic, somewhat cynical observer of mankind's foibles, follies, and cruelties. A few of the new alternative companies such as Eclipse Comics have introduced some private eyes into the medium, but this is certainly the first time in a decade or more that one of the old guard, big corporation guys has decided to take a chance on the detective genre.

When Dick Giordano first told me he'd buy the *Nathaniel Dusk* concept in a minute, I was excited. I'd heard him say the words, but I was having difficulty convincing myself I'd really heard them. Such unguarded enthusiasm from a publisher/editor is just about as rare as a private eye in comics. I was convinced that somewhere along the way there would be insistence to introduce elements of the super-hero or the supernatural (mainstays of this medium) into *Dusk*. I figured Nathaniel Dusk would be too tame a name for the protagonist, that someone would want to name him something like "Johnny Luger" or some such weapon take-off. It didn't happen.

Of course, it took a lot longer than a minute to put together the final package for *Nathaniel Dusk*.

After that initial meeting, Dick placed my twelve-page treatment on President and Publisher Jenette Kahn's desk, with his recommendation that they proceed with the project. Due to Jenette's hectic schedule, it was two or three weeks before she had a

chance to go over the material and either reject it or give her okay.

During those weeks, I was trying to find a way to survive economically, which means paying the rent and helping put some food on the table, that kind of inconsequential thing. My regular book *Sabre* was about to begin publication of new stories, but one unseen crisis after another seemed to be holding up production. A new *Ragamuffins* story was in the works, but no one had any idea when that would be finished. I had just finished editing and writing a spy magazine featuring a whole slew of material on James Bond, *I Spy*, and *The Avengers*. But now, while I waited for word on *Dusk*, work had come to a standstill. There was no check in the mail for weeks on end.

The situation was getting tense.

Dick finally called. "Jenette's read the prospectus," he told me. "She has a couple of comments, and a few elements in the story that she wants to make sure of. Why don't you come on into the office and talk it over with me?"

"Here it comes," I thought with dread. "Jenette's going to want the mask, or the cape, or the flying dog zooming around the Empire State Building, and I'm going to have to say, 'No, I can't do the strip that way,' and the whole project is going to go down the tubes, and I'm going to have to go home and tell my wife to break out the emergency rations!"

My fears were unwarranted. Jenette merely wanted to make sure that I would resolve the relationship between Joyce Gulino's children and Dusk, something I had already intended to do.

"I'd like you to work up a brief breakdown for Dusk as a four-issue mini-series," Dick told me, after allaying my fears.

"Without any flying dogs or capes or masks?" I asked.

"Right," Dick assured me, smiling. "Stop worrying about that, will you? We just want to get an idea of the whole story. Give us a sketch of the breakdown and where everything ends up."

Now, I don't believe I've ever told an editor the exact ending of any story I've written in comics. I just don't believe you can give away the ending unless you show where it came from, how you arrived there, and what it means to the characters involved. For the next two months, I worked on the prospectus for *Nathaniel Dusk*. It was a lean two months. The wind was howling outside the door. The hands of creditors became fists.

I began researching the 1930s once again, resorting first to a book I had used back when I was doing that other 30s detective, Hodiah Twist. The book was James D. Horan's *The Desperate Years*. There was a page devoted to a taxicab strike in Manhattan, and I thought it would be an interesting incident to incorporate into the story line. The strike became a rampage down the streets of Broadway; I thought it would certainly add conflict to put Dusk into its midst. I knew the strike occurred in 1934, but not what month. The next step was to begin visiting the library and start going through the microfilm files of the *New York Times* for 1934. There are a lot of pages in any given edition of the *Times*, even in the 30s. Sunday papers are a monster! Fortunately, the strike occurred in February and not November, or I might still be glaring into that viewscreen.

I used Berenice Abbott's remarkable photographic book *New York in the Thirties* to decide where Dusk's office would be and what it would look like. I went through Nikolas Muray's *Celebrity Portraits of the Twenties and Thirties* to provide role models for some of the characters. I read plays from the 30s, such as Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing*, and novels, like Rex Stout's first Nero Wolfe novel, *Fer-de-Lance*, which debuted in 1934. I wanted to get as close as I could to the slang of the time, the figures of speech, the manners of dress. Everything down to the weather on each given day is as accurate as I could make it. I'm sure there are places where I've blown it, but there is a sincere attempt to keep as close to the time as possible.

At the end of two months I came back into Dick's office with the prospectus. It was sixty-one pages in length and broke down the four issues of Nathaniel Dusk, page by page.

Dick shook his head. Another crazy writer in his office.

"Don, we trust you. You didn't have to do anything this elaborate. We just wanted a general idea of what you intended to do."

I sat in the chair before Dick's desk and nodded. "Yes. That's probably the reasonable way to do it," I agreed. "But I couldn't give you the ending. I had to show you the route I took to get there, and this was the only way I could do that."

Dick smiled. "You're a little bit crazy, you know that?"

I smiled back. "So I've been told."

And he said, "So let's get that other crazy, Gene Colan, in here. And let's get this series underway."

A few weeks later Gene sent in his first sketches of Dusk, Joyce, Cadaver, Big Mouth Willie Gugenheim, and Oscar. It is that moment, when I first see the artwork, when comics are still exciting for me, when I am a child again, with my nose pressed up against the magazine store window, eyeing all the new comics, when I am excited and scared and hopeful all at the same time. The vision and the talent of the artist you are working with can make it more than you prayed for, or less than you hoped. With Gene, I knew we were home, that there was nothing drab about this trench-coated figure, that the lines in his face and the darkness in his eyes were a testimony to the fact that Gene knew as well as I what Dusk had been through.

And the long solitary hours working with this lone solitary private eye were worth all the lean weeks, all the intense insecurities when I was putting the story together.

And if we're lucky, Dick, Gene, and I, it will be worth it to you.

But that's for you to decide.

Let us know, okay? We'll be waiting to hear from you.

Be kind to each other. Be kind to yourselves.

And hang in there!

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